Media Advisory Monday, 31 May 2019

Interacting threats driving northern seabird declines

A major review of threats to seabirds in northern Aotearoa New Zealand reveals that interactions among them are driving ongoing declines in populations

Northern New Zealand is a seabird biodiversity hotspot with over 28 species breeding in the region, five found nowhere else in the world. Very little is known about the status and threats to many of these seabirds, according to a new report released by the Northern New Zealand Seabird Trust today.

"*We must first understand what threats these seabirds are up against before we can establish a baseline from which to work on researching and conserving them*", according to lead author of the report, Ms Edin Whitehead, doctoral student at the University of Auckland.

Broadly, the threats to seabirds are categorised into six major areas: 1) Invasive species, 2) fisheries, 3) pollution, 4) climate change, 5) disease, and 6) direct human impacts (disturbance & coastal development). The review identifies knowledge gaps regarding both threats to seabirds and the biology of seabird species that need addressing, but also highlights the need for rapid action to mitigate threats.

"*Some of these seabird species we are only just discovering, such as the New Zealand storm petrel breeding on Te Hauturu-o-Toi/Little Barrier Island. It's quite possible, that if the eradication of rats and cats had not happened, we may never have known they were there,*" says Mr Chris Gaskin, co-author of the report and project coordinator of the Northern New Zealand Seabird Trust.

Some of the most vulnerable seabirds include black petrels, threatened by fisheries by-catch, and fairy terns, threatened by direct human impacts. Whereas some threats are well known, such as introduced mammalian predators and fisheries, others are only just emerging, such as climate change, pollution (especially plastic) and disease.

"*Although there has been some great progress in eradicating invasive species from islands to restore seabird populations, this isn't enough for seabirds facing multiple threats both on land and at sea*", according to report co-author Associate Professor James Russell of the University of Auckland.

The report published by the Northern New Zealand Seabird Trust through support from the Hauraki Gulf Forum and Foundation North's G.I.F.T. Initiative lays out the knowledge gaps and impediments to understanding the seabirds and threats to them. It is being released at the Birds New Zealand (Ornithological Society of NZ) conference in Wellington this weekend. [9:30am Sunday, 2 June, morning session]

Read the full report: https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/about-auckland-council/how-auckland-council-works/harbour-forums/Documents/threats-to-seabirds-northern-aotearoa.pdf

Lead author – Edin Whitehead

Edin is a current PhD candidate at the University of Auckland. Her research focuses on seabirds - particularly shearwaters – as sentinels of marine ecosystems, monitoring their health in relation to environmental changes. She works for the Northern New Zealand Seabird Trust as a field biologist and is also an award-winning wildlife photographer.

Image files

1. Cover page
2. (Caption) Edin Whitehead checking a Rako Buller's shearwater chick's condition during survey, April 2019. Photo: Chris Gaskin
3. (Caption) Launch driving at speed through a raft of shearwaters, Hauraki Gulf. Photo: Edin Whitehead
4. (Caption) Marsden Point Oil Refinery from Taranga/Hen Island, fluttering shearwaters in flight. Photo: Edin Whitehead
5. (Caption) Dead and dying Buller's and flesh-footed shearwaters that had been attracted to cruise ship lights off the Northland coast. Photo: DOC